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SUBJECT: EU GRANTS VISA FREE TRAVEL TO CITIZENS OF
SERBIA, MACEDONIA AND MONTENEGRO

REF: BRUSSELS 1597

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SUMMARY

1. EU ministers in the November 30 Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council decided to grant visa free travel to and throughout the Schengen area for citizens of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Ministers discussed the so-called "Stockholm Program" of EU activities in the area of freedom, security and justice for the period 2010-2014. They also reviewed the state of play concerning the development of the Visa Information System (VIS) and the Schengen Information System II (SIS II). Full text of the JHA Council conclusions can be downloaded from the Council website (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/Newsroom>). END SUMMARY.

VISA LIBERALIZATION FOR WESTERN BALKANS

2. EU ministers meeting in the November 30 JHA Council decided to grant visa free travel to and throughout the Schengen area for citizens of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Swedish Minister for Migration and Asylum Policy/Council chair Tobias Billstrom told a press conference the visa waiver would apply starting December 19, 2009 to holders of biometric passports. Billstrom said the EU's decision would "make a real difference for the citizens of the countries concerned, who will be able to spend Christmas in the EU."

3. Albania and Bosnia are not considered to have met all the benchmarks agreed under the visa liberalization dialogue between the EU and the countries of Western Balkans. However, ministers agreed to a political declaration of the Council and European Parliament, which invites the Commission to propose visa liberalization for the two countries as soon as they comply with all the benchmarks. The EU's stated aim is to achieve visa free travel for Bosnian and Albanian citizens "as soon as possible." The main areas where benchmarks were set under the visa liberalization dialogue are border controls, passport security, fight against organised crime and corruption, as well as external relations and fundamental rights.

4. Taking questions, Billstrom highlighted the "very clear message" sent to Albania and Bosnia on the terms of future close cooperation with the

Union. Commission Vice-President Barrot, responsible for Freedom, Security and Justice, noted that the Commission already "has the possibility" to envisage some kind of visa facilitation for the two countries (i.e., cheaper visas for some categories of citizens). Billstrom and Barrot said the Commission would soon send experts to assess progress made by Albania and Bosnia. "If and when it turns out that major progress has been made, the Commission may put forward a proposal for liberalization," Barrot said.

STOCKHOLM PROGRAM

15. In a public debate, ministers discussed the new multi-annual strategic work program of EU activities in the area of freedom, security and justice. The so-called "Stockholm Program" (2010-14) follows on the Tampere Program (2000-2004) and the Hague Program (2005-2010), covering questions of citizenship, justice and security as well as asylum, migration and the external dimension of justice and home affairs. Swedish Presidency and other EU sources described the Stockholm Program as putting "the citizen at the heart of EU action." Discussions among Home Affairs ministers on aspects falling in their area of responsibility revealed a broad consensus on the draft. Justice ministers discussed other parts of the draft on the second day of the JHA Council meeting, December 1. The finishing touches will be incorporated in the draft in the coming days so that the document can be endorsed by EU leaders at

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their December 10-11 European Council meeting.

VIS, SIS II AND IT AGENCY

16. In the Mixed Committee (EU plus Schengen members Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland), ministers noted the state of play regarding the development of the Visa Information System (VIS) and of the second-generation Schengen Information System (SIS II) intended to facilitate the exchange of information on persons and objects between national authorities in the enlarged Schengen area:

-- Regarding VIS, ministers noted a revised timetable presented by the Commission, which sets December 2010 as the new target date for deployment of the system. Once operational, VIS will support the implementation of the common visa policy and facilitate effective border control by enabling Schengen Member States to enter, update and consult visa data, including biometric data, electronically;

-- Regarding SIS II, the development of which has been dogged by technical problems and delays, the next stage in the process is a technical test to be carried out at the end of January. Ministers will then have a couple of months to decide on the next step. Should the test fail, the SIS II project could be dropped and replaced by an enhanced version of the SISone4all currently in operation (so-called "SIS I+").

17. In June 2009 the Commission proposed the setting up of an agency for large scale IT systems, which would be responsible for the operational management of VIS, SIS II and EURODAC,

the IT system for comparing the fingerprints of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. The new agency would also be in charge of the operational aspects of any other large-scale IT systems developed in the future in the area of freedom, security and justice.

OTHER ISSUES

18. The Council discussed the state-of-play of the Common European Asylum System (REFTEL). In particular, ministers noted an agreement reached between the Council and Parliament on the establishment of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) aimed at improving the implementation of the Common European Asylum System, strengthening practical cooperation among Member States on asylum as well as providing and coordinating operational support to Member States facing specific and disproportionate pressures on their national asylum systems. The EASO will be established in Valetta, Malta. The relevant legislative instruments will be adopted in the near future. The office will take over responsibility for certain operations that have until now been financed by the European Refugee Fund (ERF), which is intended to support Member States in granting reception conditions to refugees, displaced persons and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

MURRAY